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GENDER-BIASED DISCOURSE AT WORK

The discourse systems of different generations cut across the central communicative systems of a culture. In a similar way, the discourse systems of gender cut across culture and generations, corporate culture and professional specializations. As a subject of discourse research, the study of gender discourse is relatively new [3, 4, 6]. Most of what is available for analysis is based on patterns of discourse within American society, and as a result, in what follows we will again need to restrict ourselves primarily to American discourse [7, 8, 9].

The subject of our investigation is women's and men's discourse in professional communication. For this purpose the most useful pieces of research in this area are the works of Deborah Tannen [8, 9, 10]. From her analysis as well as that of many others, it is clear that the discourse of men and women forms two systems which are in many ways distinct from each other, in spite of the fact that, on the whole, boys and girls grow up in the same families, we are educated together, we form families together, and we work together in the same companies and offices and are members of the same professions and occupation groups.

The Scollons' research [7] has shown that not only do men and women work within very different interpretive frames of discourse in the home, but in professional communication these different ways of seeing the world are a major source of miscommunication, to the frustration and loss of everyone involved in them.

The main *purpose* of this article is to describe these differences and to prove that gender discrimination at work can be viewed as asymmetries of communicative style. In organizational communication, from businesses to university and public school classrooms, a clear difference between the behavior of men and women has been observed. In a business meeting of a dozen people, both men and women, it has been observed that most of the talk is dominated by the men in the group. They take the most turns at talk, and when they talk they take longer turns. From this situation one might mistakenly draw the conclusion that men talk more than women, or that women are basically taciturn. On the other hand, a similar business meeting in which the participants are all women (though in our contemporary world that is still, unfortunately, a somewhat rare occasion) finds them highly voluble with rapid exchanges of turns, much simultaneous speech, and an overall polychromatic introduction of topics.

In university classrooms in which a discussion is being led by a teacher, Tannen [10] has observed that, again, men dominate the flow of the

discussion, with women taking fewer and shorter turns. On the other hand, when the discussion takes the form of separate small groups, women who are silent in the larger setting emerge as having a good deal to say.

Both of these situations are in contrast to the common complaint of women that their men at home are sullen, silent, and withdrawn from them. This once again points up the fact that one cannot make a binary contrast between men and women, saying that women are taciturn and men are voluble. That might be said in the context of a mixed gender business meeting or a large university class discussion. On the other hand, if the context is a same-gender business meeting or a small group discussion, one would have to say that women are if anything more voluble than men. And if the context is the home, one would then want to say that men were actually taciturn.

The research literature on intergender discourse has pointed out at least nine dimensions along which men and women tend to form different interpretive frames. Many of these are quite closely related and might be considered just other ways of saying the same thing. These dimensions, which have been adapted from Tannen [9], are as follows: intimacy — independence, relationship — information, connection — status, inclusive — exclusive, rapport — report, community — contest, problems — solutions, novice — expert, listening — lecturing.

In our research we have analysed the world at work, especially in large, hierarchical organizations [5, 6, 11]. One reason why the glass ceiling exists is that promotion within firms is based on certain expectations of how people will talk — decisively, in a take-charge manner — that are gender-biased. Women are more interested in getting the job done than they are in boasting about their accomplishments. Women not only fail to brag, they also tend not to demean others. As Tannen says of herself, *"I am always careful not to make anyone look bad"* [9, 22]. No wonder women are stopped before they reach the top.

Some women do reach the top, but this does not put an end to the problems that flow from the incompatibility between women's way of talking and corporate culture. A boss exercises authority, *"but the very notion of authority is associated with maleness"* [9, 31]. Women respond to the authority that they possess by downplaying it. If, on the other hand, they relish in their power, they are accused of being a Dragon Lady, of denying their femininity. The result is a classic Batesonian double bind [12; 6].

Unlike private relationships, where people have more power to determine together the nature of their interaction, *"someone who takes a job is entering a world that is already functioning, with its own characteristic style already in place"* [9, 34]. That world is, from top to bottom, biased against female conversational styles. Women apologize more than men. They speak more indirectly. They tend not to dominate meetings. They are out of the sports talk and the dirty jokes. "F" words are also forbidden for female executives.

It may be unfair and a double standard, but high-ranking women say careers can be damaged by saying “*the hell with it,*” or other words that seem tame coming from men. Women near the top say that their advice is to ignore off-color language from male executives and reserve indignation for when it counts: salary and promotion disparities [11, 1].

Women especially need to watch phrases with a sexual undercurrent [1, 45]. The examples are endless and seem cliché or innocuous when spoken by men: *put the project to bed, screwed up, stay abreast, blown away, scare the pants off, lie down and take it, ballsy, kiss up, chewed my ass out, worked my butt off, get it off my chest.*

Benton says she has done extensive interviews with almost 100 male CEOs over five years [1, 56]. She asks them what are the intangible things holding qualified women back. Many say the women make the mistake of trying to fit in with a male vocabulary. But when coming from a woman, certain words steer male minds away from the message and give them something to chortle about among themselves. It has the same effect as if a woman wore a low-cut dress to a meeting, Benton says.

Sandra Shoemaker, Lockheed Martin Aeronautics’ vice president of program management, says when women use phrases such as “*stay abreast of things,*” she can tell from the change in the facial expressions and body language that men have lost their train of thought [2, 78]. Does it do any good to get upset? No, Shoemaker says. Doing so might make the men learn to mask their reactions in the future, but the reaction will not be changed, only hidden.

Benton and Shoemaker say many women are naive, especially young women. They take offense at the double standard, Benton says. But those who don’t speak like men and keep their language toned down “*notice an elevation of attention to what they say,*” Benton says [2, 79].

Young women have been pretty much in an equal setting in school, Shoemaker says. They haven’t stopped to think when they enter the business world that not everyone grew up in the same culture. You have to sit down with them and talk about it. The point is, it doesn’t matter if it’s fair or not. You can control yourself a lot better than you control others.

“*I totally agree,*” says Dianne Durkin, president of management consulting firm Loyalty Factor. “*Men in the business world still want women to be prim and proper*” [11, 2].

Durkin recalled one technology company where two equally qualified women were up for a promotion. The one who was passed over would say “*Oh, damn*” and was otherwise rougher around the edges.

Lisa Kazor, CEO of financial management company Savantage Solutions, says boorish language would be taken as “*strange*” coming from men or women at her company. “*It’s a tone set by leadership,*” she says [11, 2].

But at some companies, male executives seem to go out of their way to

test women by using words like “cocky” to see how they will react, Benton says. Her advice: “*Be unfazed. Water off a duck’s back. Neither smile nor act offended. Don’t respond in kind. When they realize they are not shocking you, they’ll have more respect.*” [11, 2].

Their concerns about sexual harassment make men wary of them. Great gains have been made by women in the world of work, but if these different evaluations of conversational style are allowed to persist, those gains will go for naught.

How can we describe the differences between women’s and men’s interpretive frameworks? Most of the major differences in the forms of discourse are used within these two systems. In a sense, because men and women operate within many of the same contexts, the forms of discourse themselves may not differ to a great extent. What has been observed to be a very important difference, however, is the attention given to message and to metamessage. This parallels, of course, the difference in attention given to relationship and to information. There is a tendency for men to focus on the information given, that is, the message, and for women to pay closer attention to the metamessage, that is, to how the information is to be interpreted.

This differential attention to message and metamessage, of course, is an expression of the Utilitarian ideological position of empiricism and positivism. As a result, the discourse of women is sometimes taken as not just emotional, but also opposing the ideological basis of this system. Women come to be thought of as willfully illogical and emotional. What for a woman is a concern for inequality, very much an expression of one aspect of the Utilitarian ideology, is taken as undermining that ideology. The result is that it is women who are taken to be contradictory, not the ideology of the discourse system which is producing this contradiction.

Further research

Further research can be focused on analyzing gender discourse systems in different countries. We certainly know that man’s and woman’s speech have been seen to be markedly different in many of the languages of the world. Furthermore, it is clear that in virtually any culture, the experience of women is markedly different from the experience of men, and we expect that such experiential and social differences will be codified within markedly different systems of discourse.

What remains to be seen, of course, is not whether or not discourse systems of men and women will be different. It would be very surprising if they were not. What remains to be studied, however, is the extent to which the women of one cultural group share a discourse system with the women of another cultural group. In other words, the question yet to be studied is whether or not women’s discourse forms a discourse system which cuts across major cultural lines as well as across class, ethnic, corporate, professional, and generational lines within a particular culture.

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Статья посвящена описанию различий мужского и женского дискурса на рабочем месте и обоснованию гендерной дискриминации как асимметрии коммуникативного стиля.

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